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ABSTRACT

This third in a four-part series on why academic achievement gaps exist explains how U.S. Department of Defense schools for children of military families offer lessons on how to raise academic achievement among minority students. Minority students in these schools do better than their counterparts almost anywhere in the United States on standardized tests. Though black and Hispanic students in military-run schools still generally lag behind their white counterparts, the gap is smaller than in civilian schools. Advantages of Defense Department schools include a long history educating diverse students, support of the military culture and infrastructure, and military support in promoting parent participation. Principals can enlist the local command to provide schools with volunteers and technological expertise. With frequent moves a fact of life, military children learn quickly to adjust to new settings. Defense Department schools use standardized curricula so students can make such transitions easily. Special programs exist for students who struggle academically. Students are exposed to academically challenging courses and routinely take field trips. Defense Department schools have a teaching force that is more educated and experienced than most. Teachers receive competitive salaries as well as housing allowances. (SM)

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MINORITY GAPS SMALLER IN SOME PENTAGON SCHOOLS

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

PART THREE OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

EDUCATION WEEK, v. 19 n. 29

March 29, 2000

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Editorial Projects in Education

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March 2000-April 2000

The Achievement Gap

About 3.4 million students entered kindergarten in U.S. public schools last fall, and already, at the dawn of their educational careers, researchers foresee widely different futures for them. Whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian-American will, to a large extent, predict their success in school, whether they go to college, and how much money they will earn as adults. Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education. In this four-part series, *Education Week* asks: Why do achievement gaps persist?

This project is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

Part One:"Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," March 15, 2000. After decades of school desegregation efforts, during which the gap between blacks and whites closed substantially, progress has stalled. At the same time, the greater diversity of the school population and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues. Includes:

- "Views Over the Gap";
- "As the U.S. Hispanic Population Soars, Raising Performance Becomes Vital"; and
- "Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories."

Part Two: "Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations," March 22, 2000. If the researchers studying the reasons why black and Hispanic students continue to trail non-Hispanic whites in academic achievement were pressed to say one thing for certain about their work, it might be this: The usual explanations aren't good enough. Includes:

- "In L.A.'s Koreatown, a Relentless Focus on Schooling,"
- "Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced."

Part Three:"Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools," March 29, 2000. Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

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Part Four:"Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers," April 5, 2000. The Minority Achievement Committee is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. Includes:

- "In a Texas District, Test Scores For Minority Students Have Soared."

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

March 29, 2000

Minority Gaps Smaller In Some Pentagon Schools

By Debra Viadero
Education Week

Baumholder, Germany

Third in a four-part series

If statistical odds really could predict academic success, Tieasha, a 12th grader at Baumholder High School, should be just barely making it. For starters, she is an African-American on her fifth school in 13 years. Neither her mother nor her stepfather finished college. And two-thirds of her schoolmates at the school—which serves the children of U.S. military personnel stationed here—come from families that qualify for price breaks on school lunches.

In many U.S. schools, those factors would be warning flags of potential failure, signaling what are widely considered leading causes of higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement among black and Hispanic students compared with their white and Asian-American peers.

Tieasha, above, a senior at Baumholder High School in Germany, says the military's schools provide a supportive environment.
(Photo by Sam Jones)

Instead, Tieasha soars. A talented basketball player who makes A's and B's on her report card, Tieasha scored a highly respectable 1250 on the SAT last year. This girl is headed for college.

In the 154 schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense on American military bases outside the United States, stories like Tieasha's are not all that hard to find. Black and Hispanic students in those schools—as well as the 70 other schools operated by the military on U.S. soil— do better than their counterparts almost anywhere in the United States on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a key barometer of student achievement.

Diane Rose, the mother of two Baumholder students, says it helps that Army commanders involve themselves in school affairs.
(Photo by Sam Jones)

On the writing portion of the 1998 NAEP, for example, black and Hispanic 8th graders in the Pentagon's overseas schools ranked No. 1 among their counterparts taking the test in 39 states and other jurisdictions. In 4th grade writing, the minority students from the Defense Department schools topped the list of black and Hispanic achievers again. And the story was much the same for African-American 4th and 8th graders taking NAEP tests in mathematics, science, and reading.

To be sure, blacks and Hispanics in military-run schools still generally lag behind their white and Asian-American classmates, just as they do nationwide.

But the gap is smaller than it is on average in civilian schools. And such numbers suggest that the experience of the Pentagon schools in working

with a diverse, highly mobile group of students may offer lessons for other American educators seeking ways of reducing the persistent and troubling shortfalls in student achievement among racial and ethnic minorities.

"If there's any place where children of color or minority kids are being successful, it would make sense for us to look at it and to understand why," said Howard L. Fuller, a former Milwaukee school superintendent and an education professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

On the 4th grade reading portion of NAEP, 17 test-score points separate white and black students in the overseas schools. Nationwide, in comparison, the same gap—at 32 points—is nearly twice as large. In the Kaiserslautern school district, which includes Baumholder High and 18 other schools on U.S. Army and Air Force bases in west-central Germany, some principals say there are no test-score disparities in their schools at all.

The surprise is that the Pentagon schools are able to produce better-than-average minority achievement despite some real obstacles to learning. With an average of more than a third of their 115,000 students moving to new schools each year, the Defense Department schools have mobility rates rivaling those of many urban systems. And—of particular concern in a district such as this that is close to international hot spots—huge numbers of military families effectively become single-parent homes for months at a time on a regular basis.

The Baumholder Military Community, a sprawling complex set amid rugged farmlands and vineyards east of the Mosel River, is home to 5,000 military personnel and their families.

From here, Army brigades might deploy to Bosnia, Kosovo, or Albania. What's more, at least half the parents of students in the Kaiserslautern district receive low enough salaries that their children qualify for federal free or reduced-price lunches. If the military can keep minority students performing at higher-than-average levels, some observers have begun to say, civilian schools might be able to do the same.

"I believe one of the big factors is that we have tended to look at all students in our expectations for them," said Ray Tolleson, the interim director of the Department of Defense Education Activity, which oversees Pentagon schools in the United States and abroad.

'Place of Duty'

Defense Department schools, to be sure, have certain advantages. For starters, the Pentagon has a longer history than many school districts in educating a diverse student population. The Defense Department's overseas schools have been formally integrated since just after World War II. Now, Hispanic, African-American, and biracial children make up 39 percent of the enrollment in the military's schools abroad and 45 percent of the students in its domestic schools.

> Another reason cuts across racial and ethnic lines: Educators in military-run schools can rely on the military culture and infrastructure for support to a degree unheard of in regular public schools.

Having trouble getting a mom or dad in for a parent-teacher conference? Call the commanding officer, and that soldier is likely to get a dressing down.

The Army, in fact, has formally notified officers and enlisted men and women that their "place of duty" at parent-conference time is in their children's classrooms.

"From a parents' point of view, it seems sort of intrusive that your boss gets involved in your personal affairs," said Diane Rose, the mother of two Baumholder High students

Army Lt. Col. Mark McAlister, left, says the military culture creates an atmosphere where minority students can thrive.

(Photo by Sam Jones)

and wife of an Army major. "But it also works because you know the commander is going to let a parent off to come to school functions."

In addition, family members who become chronic troublemakers in school or in the community can be shipped back home to the States. And parents in this 9,300-student district, the Pentagon system's largest, can recall occasions when the military made good on that threat.

"I don't view it as a sword of Damocles hanging over people's heads," said Brig. Gen. Michael Maples, an Army tactical commander at Baumholder. "But it's there."

Community Support

Principals can also call on the local command to provide muscle, volunteers, technological expertise, and other help they may need to keep their schools running smoothly.

At Neubruecke Elementary School, a K-6 school just up the road from Baumholder High, the former principal turned to an Army battalion commander last year for help finding adult mentors for students. Of the 10 volunteers that Lt. Col. Mark McAlister sent from his finance battalion, none—including the lieutenant colonel himself—had children of their own at the school.

"School support is not much different than mission support in Kosovo," said Col. McAlister, clad in camouflage gear and fresh from a mission to the Balkans.

The mentors also volunteered as substitute dance partners at a father-daughter dance last spring that was held at a time when many of the school's fathers were on their way to Albania for a six-month stay. An Army commander, equipped with maps and overheads, visited the school again right after that deployment to show the students where their parents were—visits that helped quiet rampant rumors of parents "going to war."

"Everything in the Army is designed so that when a soldier is deployed somewhere, he can focus on the task at hand," noted Maj. John Miller, an Army operations officer and Neubruecke parent. "I can't have a soldier deployed somewhere worrying about whether his family's being taken care of."

Despite those advantages, the military schools must still face many of the same problems—mobile families, absent parents, scarce resources, disruptive students—as typical stateside schools. And a few extra ones.

Pentagon Schools at a Glance

	Department of Defense Dependents Schools (overseas)	Department of Defense Domestic Elementary & Secondary Schools (U.S. territory)
Number of schools	154	70
Total Number of students	74,193	33,863
Percentage white	47%	46%
Percentage African-American	17%	25%
Percentage Hispanic	15%	6%
Percentage Asian-American	7%	15%
	8%	4%

Figures are for either 1999-00 or 1998-99 school year.
Percentages for racial/ethnic breakdowns do not add up to 100.

The weeks surrounding the departures and returns of parents, for example, are typically emotionally fragile times for children, teachers said. And classroom misbehaviors tend to crop up more often during those periods.

As a self- described "inner-city Philadelphia knucklehead," Col. McAlister, an African American officer whose Army career spans 18 years, said he could well be an advertisement for the Army's expertise in fostering high minority achievement.

The Army doesn't take a person's race or background as an excuse for poor performance, he said. And in the service, he added, overt demonstrations of racial prejudice are dealt with harshly.

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"I was a 20-year-old second lieutenant, and the Army looked at me and handed me 50 soldiers and said, 'You're responsible for their care and well-being,'" the colonel said. "No one ever said, 'You're a minority' or 'You're from the inner city.' You'd be amazed at how often people live up to what's expected of them."

Darryl Levin, a 3rd grade teacher at Neubruecke, has similarly high expectations for his students, half of whom are members of minorities and many of whom are from low-income families. "I expect every single one of my kids to go to college and get a professional job," said Mr. Levin.

Systemwide, more than three-quarters of seniors go on to higher education once they graduate—well above the 67 percent of U.S. high school graduates overall who go directly to college. If a military career is their choice, postsecondary education is required in order to move up the ranks.

"You're looking at an organization that rewards educational success immediately and equates it to higher rank and more money," Col. McAlister said. "Part of that has to have an effect."

'More Supportive'

Tieasha, the Baumholder High senior—Pentagon policy prohibits disclosing the full names of children in its schools abroad—also says school success is a natural byproduct of growing up as an Army brat. With frequent moves a fact of life, military children learn quickly to adjust to new settings and new faces. At Baumholder, 39 percent of Tieasha's schoolmates, in fact, will change schools this year.

In the classroom as well as the lunchroom, the school mixes black, white, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native American students. The children of generals learn and play alongside those of privates.

"Everybody's in the same situation you are, so they help you out a bit," Tieasha said. "As soon as you come to the school, people talk to you. They know what it's like for you."

High student mobility is often cited in the United States—especially in urban schools—as a contributing factor to poor student achievement.

Recognizing the potential problems, the Department of Defense schools standardized their curricula in 1994 so that a student moving from Fort Knox in Kentucky can expect to see the same textbooks in a classroom in Aviano, Italy, or Mannheim, Germany. The Pentagon has commissioned a study to explore further ways to ease secondary school students' frequent transitions.

Here in the Kaiserslautern district, schools also offer special programs for students who are struggling academically or just underachieving— just as many civilian schools do.

Reading Recovery, a widely used program from the States that is aimed at giving one-on-one reading instruction to 1st graders, operates in every elementary school here. Older students whose achievement lags can get guidance, tutoring in needed study skills, and the push they need to

Part I "Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," *March 15, 2000* : Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education.

Part 2 "Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations," *March 22, 2000* : Why do the achievement gaps persist? Some blame it on teachers; others say too much TV. In a Korean-American community, parents take no chances when it comes to their children's education.

Part 3 *March 29, 2000* : Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families may offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part 4 *April 5, 2000* : There are no sure answers, but some experts say better teaching, smaller classes, the right schoolwide improvement program, and fairer allocation of resources can shrink achievement gaps. A Houston-area district has some answers of its own.

Coverage of urban education is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

take college-placement courses through Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID—a national program that is noteworthy for its success with minority students.

The Defense Department school system has also raised its graduation requirements and eliminated basic courses at the high school level. Now all students in Pentagon-run high schools must, for example, take two years of a foreign language, three years of science, and complete coursework in algebra and geometry.

The single biggest predictor of college success, a growing number of studies show, is whether students take academically challenging courses in high school.

"The curricular content might be more meaningful to our kids because they see the link," said Archie W. Bates, Kaiserslautern's superintendent. "If you speak of Asia in class, well many of our kids have been to Asia."

Baumholder High students routinely take field trips to Paris, London, and Brussels.

But it also helps that teachers— many of whom are military spouses or have attended Pentagon schools themselves— understand what students are going through, too, according to Tieasha.

Nationwide, a growing body of research suggests that minority students—particularly those in big city schools—typically get the least experienced and most poorly qualified teachers.

The Pentagon schools benefit from a teaching force that is more educated and more experienced than most. In the Kaiserslautern district, 74 percent of teachers have master's degrees or better. Just as many have been on the job for more than a decade.

Teachers' longevity is explained in part by the downsizing of the military. With bases closing around the world, the teachers who still have jobs in the system are those who have been there the longest. But teachers here said they also stick around because they like the work.

"This is la-la land compared to the states," said Dominick Calabria, Baumholder's principal.

The allure of life abroad keeps many teachers happy, and even this rural district, spanning rugged hills, forests, farms, and small towns in west-central Germany, is only a 50- mile drive from France and Luxembourg. Bigger German cities, such as Frankfurt and Bonn, are even closer.

Teachers earn salaries roughly comparable to those of their counterparts in large school systems back home. For example, a teacher who holds a master's degree and who figures about midway on the Pentagon's complicated, 18-step pay schedule can earn about $41,000 a year. Overseas teachers also get an allowance that pays three-quarters of their housing costs.

Mr. Levin's room at Neubruecke rivals that of any well-off suburban school in the states. He has Internet access, six computers, a closed-circuit television and VCR, a movie screen, and an overhead projector.

The Defense Department spends an average of $8,579 per pupil on its overseas schools—24 percent more than the national average. But, since military schools are not allowed to accept grants or federal Title I funds—pots of money that a lot of districts don't count in their per-pupil figures—it's hard to tell whether that number is as generous as it sounds. Affluent suburban systems, such as Shaker Heights, Ohio, in comparison, spend more than $10,000 per pupil.

Smaller Classes

Students wait for buses at Baumholder High School in Baumholder, Germany, one of the schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military personnel.
(Photo by Sam Jones)

More important than the bottom line, though, is that the money is equitably distributed.

"There are no disparities between schools," said Mary Thompson, a 4th grade teacher at Sembach Elementary-Middle School at Sembach Air Base about 60miles from Baumholder. "We don't have the inner-city and suburban schools."

And, while small schools and classrooms are not the rule throughout the Pentagon system, Kaiserslautern has a fair share of both. Baumholder, like many of the high schools in the system, has only 395 students. Military personnel typically retire before their children reach high school.

Neubruecke Elementary has 235 pupils, while Sembach enrolls nearly 800.

Class sizes vary, too—so much so that figures showing average class sizes have little meaning. At Neubruecke, Mr. Levin has 28 3rd graders this year. Still, he finds the time to send home weekly newsletters as well as daily progress reports on every single student.

"Because of the progress reports, I get things back saying something like, 'In three weeks, Dad's going to be gone for about four months. Let me know if there are any problems.'"

But, if the schools are small so is their "town" here. Parents frequently visit and volunteer in the schools. One reason is that so few of them have opportunities to work outside the home."It was my social life a lot of times because I felt joy when I did things for people here," said Kathy Snyder, the wife of an Army dentist and a parent of two children at Neubruecke.

But parents also come because they are welcome. "At the civilian school my kids went to in Texas, the most I could do for my kids was drive them there, go with them on field trips, and pick them up at the end of the school day," said Grace Johnson, a mother of seven from Sembach. "Here, I know everyone."

Even families without children turn out for basketball games and other events. "It's like everyone here is all hyped up about your future," said Shannon, a classmate of Tieasha's who is also African-American.

And, as is true in many small towns, parents say they feel their children are safe in the schools. "They don't let anyone stand on the corner or drink here," Ms. Thompson of Sembach said. "We're free to concentrate on schooling."

Worth a Look?

Some experts contend that much of the praise being heaped on Pentagon-run schools may be undeserved. Gerald W. Bracey, an education researcher and writer, notes, for example, that many conditions under which they operate cannot be replicated in civilian schools. And, he points out, even if military families qualify for free school lunches, they still have a roof over their heads, a regular paycheck, and free medical care.

"You won't find military kids living in the conditions found in Southeast Los Angeles or Spanish Harlem," he wrote in a recent letter to education leaders.

What's more, slightly higher-than-average percentages of military parents have a high school diploma or better. When the NAEP scores for the children of like-educated families in the military and in civilian schools are compared, the overall scores on the 8th grade math, science,

and reading exams are more comparable. Thus, Mr. Bracey concludes, "the magic of the military is a mirage."

Mr. Fuller of Marquette University isn't so sure. Given the limited success that U.S. schools have had in recent years in reducing the minority achievement gap, he said, the military's successes deserve a closer look. "And we should not look at it with any preconceived notions that explain away any success or suggest why it couldn't happen someplace else," he said.

On the Web

Review the curriculum taught at the Department of Defense schools.

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